Students Reading Below Grade Level: 4th Grade

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Introduction 3

Statement of the Problem 3

Review of Related Literature 4

Statement of the Hypothesis 6

Method

Participants (N) 7

Instrument(s) 7

Experimental Design

Procedure

Results

Discussion

Implications

References 8

Appendix (ces)

English Language Arts Scoring Performance Table 10

National Report Card 2009 Chart 11

Consent Forms 12

Introduction

Reading is an important component of education; it is the comprehension of written text. Teaching reading in schools includes oral language, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, prior knowledge, comprehension, motivation, integrated reading, writing and texts. Students are able to read when they are able to process and recognize words as well as comprehending what they read (Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt & Kamil, n.d.). However, a large number of our nation’s students are not reading on grade level. Students are not reading on grade level because there is not enough emphasis on the skills and strategies to use during reading comprehension, within the classroom. It is vital for teachers to model how to implement and use strategies in reading comprehension. Often times when phonetics and vocabulary are taught, these skills are not used in readings to comprehend the text (Brenda, Buck & Giles, 2009). Students may be able to understand the vocabulary and are capable of reading the word but this does mean that the student understands what is being read. These students would become frustrated when they are not taught how to apply their decoding skills with the text that is being read (Cooper, n.d.).

Elementary students in NYC are required to take state exams such as the English Language Arts Test. This exam is used to determine the students’ reading proficiency based on a series of reading passages and questions. All state exams are scored on a four point system. Based on the English Language Arts Scoring Performance Table[[1]](#footnote-1), if students receive a score of 3 or 4, they are considered to have met the reading standard and grade level. If students receive a score of 1 or 2, they are below reading level and do not meet the state standards (New York City Department of Education, 2011).

The Alliance of Excellent Education (2006) shows factual data that eight million students in the nation read below grade level. These students are able to decode texts but are unable to comprehend what they read. This fact sheet shows statistics of students in grades 4-12 that read below grade level.

Statement of Problem

In 2009, 46% of large city public schools in the fourth grade read below reading level. Compared to the Nation’s public schools, 34% of fourth graders are below reading level[[2]](#footnote-2) (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Students that read below grade level struggle with reading comprehension. The inability to read at grade level will prevent a student from excelling in other subjects; from simple tasks of reading directions to analyzing scientific research (Mounce, n.d.). Successful reading comprehension prepares many students for college. Students will not be ready for the future if they don’t know how to read at their level. This in turn will affect their future career (ACT, n.d.).

When teachers encourage reading as a lifelong habit, this motivation increases a student’s reading level naturally. Teachers should model reading as a form of encouragement and importance to literature. Giving students the ability to choose text of their interest will increase knowledge and reading skills. It is also important that students have time to read independently in school and out of school because this independent reading is used to build on reading skills such as fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (Duncan, 2010). However, not all students receive the opportunity to read for pleasure and to build on these reading skills. The only availability is during classroom time in school.

In the research of Begeny (2011), 40% of fourth grade students in the Unites States are not fluent readers. His research study focuses on building fluency instructional strategies. Reading fluency is an important part of improving a struggling reader’s reading level. Without effective reading programs, such as guided reading, many students will not read on grade level.

Review of Related Literature

Current Instructional Strategy

The instructional strategies currently used in New York City’s classrooms are read aloud and guided reading. Read aloud is the process in which an educator reads a text to a group of students out loud. The strategy of read aloud increases a student’s ability to comprehend the text, build on vocabulary and to become familiar with sound (Cummins & Stellmeyer-Gerade, 2011). Campbell (2001) researches the impact that teachers have on the increase in literacy rate of students by conducting an interactive read aloud in the classroom. Children learn from teachers as they model how to read and are able to develop an understanding of the text through interactive class discussions. When teachers’ model read aloud students are able to enhance their reading fluency (Kruse, 2007). Learning activities that encourage discussion, creative thinking and art, all improves a student’s reading level.

Despite the cultural differences in students, all students benefit from read aloud (Furtado, 2008). Using Yopp’s Preview- Predicit- Confirm (PPC) model, this study shows that read-alouds are effective in all diversified age groups. The PPC model is used to determine comprehension of a text. This strategy allows students to preview the book by using illustrations to make inferences and by asking questions. As the teacher reads the book, students are able to predict what will happen in the story by combining prior knowledge with new knowledge. Answering lingering questions and understanding the main idea will help students to confirm their comprehension of the storyline. The general idea of the PPC model is effective as an instructional strategy (Furtado, 2008).

When teachers combine the PPC model with read alouds, it increases the students’ fluency rate. According to Adamson, Adamson, Anderson, Clausen-Grace, Earnes, Einarson, & …Wooten (2006), the importance of read aloud is vital in aiding teachers with the skills necessary to nurture a student’s reading comprehension through fluency. Fluency is an important component of bridging the gap on standardized tests.

However, as Brenda, Buck and Giles (2009) has mentioned, students whom are below reading level, struggle with reading due to basic skills such as phonetics and phonemes. Although read aloud is important, students should also learn the basic phonetic skills to read independently. Instead of becoming familiar with the sound of a letter, being able to phonetically read and comprehend the alphabetic letter is also important. According to Cummings, Dewey, Latimer and Good III (2011),reading comprehension begins with basic strategy skills that students learn in school such as nonsense word fluency (NWF) and oral reading fluency (ORF). Nonsense word fluency has a basic focus on decoding strategies; sound by sound, word blending, whole words, decoding and recoding. Both skills and strategies are taught early in the school year to increase reading comprehension. Kruse (2007) notices that read aloud prevents beginning readers from reading independently. Some students rely on the comfort of teachers modeling how to read while other students lose focus and interest in the text. It is difficult to determine when and if students listen during read aloud. Regardless, students should be able to use reading strategies and skills to read on their own for comprehension as oppose to having the teacher read aloud to them.

Many public schools in New York City offer guided reading as a tool for instructional strategy. Guided reading is when teachers provide structure, instruction and purpose to reading by responding to literature. The practice of guided reading was implemented in the 1900’s and from there changed over time. In 1946, Emmitt Betts determined that students need directions and instructions on learning how to read (Ford & Opitz, 2011). Although Betts implemented this idea through a directed reading activity, it was none the less the beginning of the formation of guided reading. In a directed reading activity students read literature silently and independently to apply what they know to comprehension. About 10 years later, Lillian Gray and Dora Reese changed Bett’s guided reading to include strategic lessons and questioning to motivate reading comprehension. Ford & Opitz (2011) also mentioned that the mini lessons that are taught during guided reading often times include the skills and strategies needed to enhance reading comprehension, accuracy, fluency and vocabulary. Through practice and understanding, students are able to become independent readers. Ferguson and Wilson (2009) provides an emphasis that guided reading builds comprehension strategies. Some of these comprehension strategies include context clues, making inferences, sequence of event and understanding the main idea.

However, Ferguson and Wilson (2009) also mentions the negative aspects of guided reading. Many of the strategies taught in guided reading are redundant and can be seen in other lessons throughout the day. For example, one teacher states that she conducts reading pairs, leading questions, completes K-W-L chart, word study, and a mini lessons consisting of: fluency, comprehension and reading strategies. The content that is learned during regular class time can also be seen during guided reading. Often times reading skills and strategies are taught as part of a lesson within the curriculum. If guided reading is implemented during class time it reiterates strategies that are taught throughout the day in class. Some teachers feel as though this repetition wastes valuable learning time within other content subject areas.

Practitioners and Theorists

The comprehension of any type of literature begins with the mental structure of each individual. The purpose of the English Language Arts Test is to examine the students’ ability to comprehend what they read. The practice of mental measurement has been observed since the early 1900’s. Caldenhead (1987) explains that the idea of grading a student’s ability to read originated from William McGuffy’s practice that different age groups need different reading materials. For example, some students are able to comprehend news paper articles while others can only benefit from reading chapter books. The reading comprehension is based on the difficulty of the text and the individual reading the text. However, measuring reading levels stemmed from Francis Galton’s theory of mental measurement. Social and psychological development arises from knowledge. Complexities such as mental thinking can be measured. James Cattell believed that anything complex can be measured and reduced to a simplistic version. Mental measuring was introduced to public schools in 1922. Lewis Terman was the first person to suggest that all students should be given an intelligence test (Caldenhead, 1987).

Since a person’s mind can be measured based on retention and comprehension of various educational knowledge, synthesis of text through questioning, reading levels and text gradients were discovered. Beck and McKeown (2001) are practitioners that examine the benefits of read aloud to young children. The interaction between the teacher and student is what guides read aloud and critical questioning. The two main features of read aloud are text and talk. The text of a book is important because students should be able to comprehend the content yet the text also needs to provide a challenge. Talking about the book and text helps students to synthesize their ideas into deep thoughts.

The idea of text gradients and reading levels stem from Fountas and Pinnell. These theorists uses small group guided reading practices to develop comprehension skills based on a student’s reading level. It was from this practice that Fountas and Pinnell’s found a need of using A-Z text gradients (Thomas, n.d.). The idea of guided reading to improve reading comprehension has created an influence in the proposed intervention of this study to change the current instructional strategy. Moving from read aloud into guided reading would increase the reading level of struggling students.

Proposed Intervention

If students are not taught the strategies and skills necessary to learn how to read then they will not be able to read at grade level (Thames, 2008). Throughout a student’s academic education, it is important to teach skills that strategically enhance the application of phonetics into comprehension of the text. Some students can understand how to decode words and texts but are not able to apply these skills into reading (Cooper, n.d). Therefore, it is highly valuable for teachers to model, teach and practice basal reading skills and application into various types of readings. My intervention would include guided reading programs that are offered to students early in the morning. Even with a focus on reading during classroom activities, many students that are below reading level require additional time and guidance to develop basic reading skills, which are necessary to read at grade level. Providing students with opportunity for additional reading help in the morning enables students to increase their reading skills. Santa and Hoien (1999) noticed the main difference between struggling readers and average readers are the rate and process of comprehending instructional phonetics. Offering guided reading programs will give students the opportunity to gain skills in word recognition, reading texts and writing. However, improvement in reading level varies depending on the time of day. This study is focused on guided reading programs for students in the morning, before class begins.

Statement of Hypothesis

Providing two groups of six - fourth grade students in P.S. X, Brooklyn, NY with guided reading instruction for 40 minutes, every morning, five days a week for six weeks, will increase students’ reading level as measured by Fountas and Pinnell’s running record.

Having two groups of six - fourth grade students in P.S. X, Brooklyn, NY without guided reading instruction, every morning, five days a week for six weeks, will not increase students’ reading level as measured by Fountas and Pinnell’s running record.

Participants

There would be four focus groups in this intervention. The first two groups consists of fourth grade students that gain additional help in using comprehension strategies through guided reading, in the morning. The third and fourth group consists of fourth grade students that will not receive any additional help through guided reading programs.

Instruments

All groups will be assessed through a running record. Prado and Lee (2011) researches the effects of reading strategies and the ways in which these skills can increase a student’s ability in achieving higher reading levels. Running records can assess a student’s use and understanding of the various comprehension skills. Ross (2004) conducts a research to prove that running records are effective in improving a student’s reading. Teachers are able to assess a student’s fluency in reading and reading comprehension. The running record will determine areas of improvement for each student as well as their strengths. Students in treated schools that used running records outperformed those students in near treated schools by 12%.

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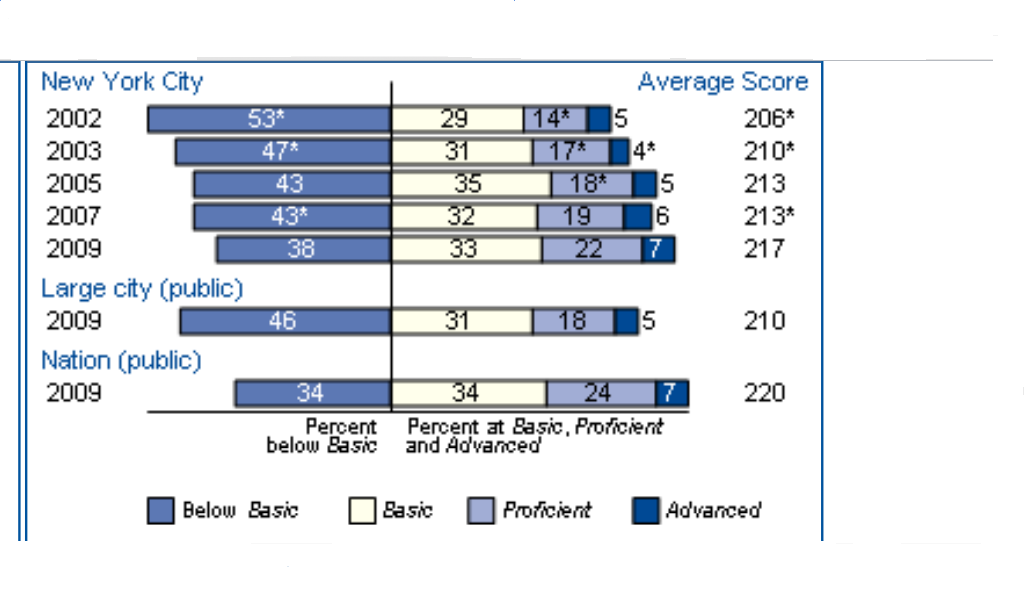
Appendix 1: New York City Department of Education: English Language Arts Scoring Standards

Performance Levels: The four proficiency levels that show how students have mastered the knowledge and skills that make up the learning standards. When a student is on level 3 or 4, he or she has exceeded the standard.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | **Meeting Standard** | **Level 4** **(Meeting Learning Standards with Distinction)** | **Student performance demonstrates a thorough understanding of the ELA knowledge and skills expected at the grade level.** | | **Level 3** **(Meeting Learning Standards)** | **Student performance demonstrates an understanding of the ELA knowledge and skills expected at the grade level.** | | **Below Standard** | **Level 2** **(Partially Meeting Learning Standards)** | **Student performance demonstrates a partial understanding of the ELA knowledge and skills expected at the grade level.** | | **Level 1** **(Not Meeting Learning Standards)** | **Student performance does not demonstrate an understanding of the ELA knowledge and skills expected at the grade level.** | |

Appendix 2: The Nations Report Card: Grade 4: Year 2009

**Achievement- Level Percentages and Average Score Results**



Dear Administrator(s),

Brooklyn College has been very fortunate to receive the opportunity to work with your school. As a student teacher at your school, I and requesting permission to conduct an action research project with the fourth grade class. Over the course of six weeks, five days a week, struggling readers are offered guided reading during the 40 minutes extended time in the morning. The purpose of the research is to use guided reading programs to increase the reading level of the two groups of six students used during research.

I appreciate your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me for further information.

Sincerely,

Annie La

Dear Classroom Teacher,

As a student teacher in your fourth grade class, I and requesting permission to conduct an action research project with the fourth grade class. Over the course of six weeks, five days a week, struggling readers are offered guided reading during the 40 minutes extended time in the morning. The purpose of the research is to use guided reading programs to increase the reading level of the two groups of six students used during research.

With your consent I will include a parent/student consent form for the participating students. I appreciate your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me for further information.

Sincerely,

Annie La

Dear Parents/Guardian,

Brooklyn College has been very fortunate to receive the opportunity to work with P.S. X . As a student teacher in your child’s fourth grade class, I and requesting permission to conduct an action research project which includes your child’s involvement. Over the course of six weeks, everyday, two groups of six students are offered guided reading during the 40 minutes extended time in the morning. The purpose of the research is to use guided reading programs to increase the reading level of these six students.

I appreciate your time and consideration. Please complete the form below and have your child return the cut off to the classroom teacher.

Sincerely,

Ms. La

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I understand that my child \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will receive the opportunity to work with the teacher and student teacher during guided reading, in the morning, for 40 minutes. This research is conducted in two groups of six- fourth grade students over the course of six weeks, within 5 days a week.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. See Appendix for English Language Arts Scoring Performance Table [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Appendix for Nations Report Card Statistics [↑](#footnote-ref-2)